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Remastering a Classic: Herman Miller Launches New Aeron



Iconic Aeron Reborn
October 20, 2016





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Remastering a Classic: Herman Miller Launches New Aeron

WITH THE INPUT OF ORIGINAL CO-DESIGNER DON CHADWICK, AND A TEAM OF SCIENTISTS, ENGINEERS, MATERIALS SPECIALISTS AND RESEARCHERS WHO WORKED ON THE PROJECT FOR OVER TWO YEARS, HERMAN MILLER HAS ENHANCED THE CHAIR BY COMBINING THE LATEST INSIGHTS SINCE AERON WAS FIRST LAUNCHED IN 1994. WORDS BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

Herman Miller announced today that the iconic Aeron chair, which for more than two decades has been the symbol of start-ups and creatives, the dot-com culture and the corporate excesses of the early 2000s, is getting a major top-to-bottom overhaul that keeps the classic shape, but updates just about everything else on it.

It is a casters-to-mesh revamp that is meant to keep the most popular chair ever designed the go-to throne of a new generation of workers. Perhaps the only office product to make the leap from office tool to pop culture icon, the Aeron keeps its distinctive silhouette, but is rebuilt from the ground up.

With the input of original co-designer Don Chadwick, and a

team of scientists, engineers, materials specialists and researchers who worked on the project for over two years, Herman Miller has enhanced the chair by combining the latest insights since Aeron was first launched in 1994. Major advancements in anthropometrics, ergonomics, materials, manufacturing and technology are built into the new Aeron.



At first glance, it might not look markedly different, but the company promises that the remastered Aeron features stronger and smarter materials, better adjustment capabilities, intuitive controls, a new mesh for enhanced aeration, and a more comfortable sit.

Here's what's new:

- **Better movement** — The frame angle of the new Aeron has been adjusted 1.8 degrees forward to better support the body in the upright position and across a wider range of seating. The new Aeron has a slimmer, updated tilt mechanism, probably one of the most visually striking differences from the classic. Herman Miller claims the new Aeron will “move with them seamlessly to offer proper ergonomic support across a larger variety of tasks.”
- **Improved lower back support** — A few years after Aeron was originally launched, Herman Miller added PostureFit to provide back support that sustains the pelvis in its natural forward tilt. With the new Aeron, the company is adding PostureFitSL, which it promises will help rotate the pelvis forward, along with a secondary pad designed to provide comfort and support to the lumbar region of the spine. Together, the two areas on PostureFitSL are designed to help strengthen the spine to produce what Herman Miller calls “power posture.”

- **A totally new mesh** — Called 8Z Pellicle, this new mesh creates a comfortable sit through eight varied zones of tension in the seat and back. The tightest zones provide firm support where the sitter needs it, while more slack zones conform to the sitting bones and distribute weight evenly. Herman Miller claims each of 8Z Pellicle’s zones serves a specific purpose. Four tight zones engage the user and are the first point of contact with the suspension material to reinforce a healthful seated posture. Two nesting zones provide a lower amount of tension to cradle the sit bones and scapulars and reduce pressure in those areas. Two zones of stabilization accommodate the key muscle groups of the sitter at a healthy angle without letting the body sink into the chair. Together, the company says, the zones deliver the support the body needs to stay active throughout the day.
- **Easier to use controls** — Users of the classic Aeron complained about the number of turns it took to get the recline and resistance dialed in. Depending on the user’s size, it took as many as 50 turns of the tilt mechanism. The new Aeron helps users find the right tension with just a few turns of the knob. The new Aeron also includes an updated arm mechanism that allows for up and down, front to back and

side to side adjustments. Herman Miller plans to transition from the classic Aeron to the new Aeron over the next 18 to 24 months. During that time, the company will run parallel production of the classic Aeron and the new chair, said spokeswoman Kimberly Oliver. “We’ve designed the transition around the ability to sell the new version to the existing installed base as we secure new projects,” she said. “The development challenges encompassed not only the complex design and engineering of the product itself, but also the preparation of the manufacturing capacity to make thousands of chairs per week, on three continents, to meet the anticipated demand of customers around the world.”

There is, of course, danger that fans of the classic will treat it with the same disdain as Coca-Cola customers did New Coke. It’s not easy to update an iconic seat in a way that will make everyone happy. According to Chadwick, it’s still Aeron, but it’s a whole new chair.

While some advancements are more visible, there is literally not a single component that was left untouched. “With great intent, we retained the essential problem-solving of the original and the iconic visual form, while improving on every aspect of the performance,” Oliver said. “Given our focus on human-centered design, perhaps the most debated topic was the form and location of controls, specifically the forward seat angle control and the tilt limiter control. We aspired to design and place the controls so users would be more likely to locate and intuitively utilize the functions, but exactly how to deliver on that particular aspira-

tion required many iterations to achieve.”

Oliver said the response of customers and designers who have previewed the new chair has shown the differences will not “underwhelm” those looking for a totally different seating experience. She said the company has gotten a lot of “wows” in side-by-side tests.

While the new chair intentionally retains the classic silhouette, she said, the experience is markedly different. “The next generation zoned support of the 8Z Pellicle, the more balanced ride of the updated kinematics, and the new PostureFitSL work in concert with other enhancements

such as more intuitive controls to again raise the bar for seated comfort. We look forward to having more clients and designers sit in the new Aeron and feel the difference in person,” Oliver said.

It was important for the company to keep the iconic shape of the original. The ground up rebuild was possible because of new material innovations designed to make the chair even better. And while the original Aeron initially became the darling of the tech industry, Herman Miller hopes the new version appeals to a wide variety of customers.

“Aeron is not limited to any one industry or customer demographic, from startups of all types



to the 33 of the Fortune 100 that use the chair,” Oliver said. “To date, we have sold well over 7 million Aeron, in 134 countries around the world. The chair is used by corporate leaders, artists, writers, musicians, authors, athletes, and innovators of all types.”

The new Aeron is missing a key part of the original design team. Bill Stumpf died in a few years ago. But Chadwick was an integral part of the remastering of the chair, Oliver said.

Herman Miller asked Chadwick to reexamine the design criteria that led he and Stumpf to the classic Aeron in the context of today’s work and technology. To retain the existing seat and back silhouette and incorporate a composite leaf spring tilt mechanism, he had

to rescale all of the aluminum castings making up the chair’s structure. Over the course of two years, Herman Miller’s research and development team worked with Chadwick, Dr. Brock Walker, Laura Guido-Clark, and many engineers and materials specialists on the new Aeron.

So why mess with a classic? The workplace that Aeron launched into in 1994 is unrecognizable today. And frankly, customers were looking for more. Since its introduction, Aeron has been

the world’s most successful high performance task chair. As Aeron aged, sales volume stabilized over time. Oliver said the new Aeron will “extend this powerful franchise into the future and reinforce Herman Miller’s worldwide leadership in workplace innovation and high performance seating, given the integration of the latest developments in ergonomics and material sciences.”

Apple customers wouldn’t buy

the chair fully accommodates the widest possible range of activities and postures people adopt while working—from intense upright focus to relaxed contemplative recline. For specifiers and organizations, cross-performance makes Aeron suitable for a wide array of workplace settings—from residential workpoints to shared workshops. Our research finds that organizations are realizing the impact of employees’

health and wellness on their productivity and overall satisfaction, and the new Aeron has been designed from top to bottom to enhance performance and comfort for all users.”

The new Aeron will be a world chair, available in all markets where Herman Miller



a mobile phone with 22 year old technology. As work changes, workers feel the same about their ergonomic task chairs. People require freedom and variety within their offices to support multiple types of work. “The new Aeron is a cross-performance and cross-floorplate solution equally well suited to a quick brainstorming session among colleagues as to hours of concentrated focus on a dedicated task,” Oliver said.

“For individuals sitting in Aeron, cross-performance design means

products are sold. The new chair is available to order now in North America, Latin America and Mexico, the Middle East and Africa. It will be available in the United Kingdom and Europe in January 2017 and Asia in February 2017. On a comparable feature basis, the new Aeron’s price points are very similar to the classic Aeron, although Herman Miller will offer an expanded set of options to customers.

MSRP will start at \$720.

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The Phenomenon Known as Aeron

Despite a fair amount of focus-group dissonance and doubt, the chair debuted to approving, even awestruck throngs at Orgatec 1994. By the time I joined the Herman Miller communications team in the spring of 1998, Aeron had become an object of desire for many upwardly mobile office workers, as well as a reliable cash cow for Herman Miller's employees and shareholders.

Words by Bruce Buursma



When Herman Miller launched Aeron, the disruptively different chair design from the perfectly complementary minds of Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick, all heaven broke loose.

Despite a fair amount of focus-group dissonance and doubt, the chair debuted to approving, even awestruck throngs at Orgatec 1994. At the show, German, French and British trade magazine covers were adorned with photos of the design that seemed at first glance both elegantly minimalist and oddly unfinished. Even before the first production run, the Aeron had been positioned cleverly for commercial notice by being accessioned into the permanent design collection of New York City's Museum of Modern Art.

Soon thereafter, the media attention snowballed into a heaving avalanche in North America, with breathless stories in the general press as well as design, business, shelter and technology publications. Aeron started showing up on movie sets and in television shows, and as a prop in national advertisements for -- yes, really -- other products.

By the time I joined the Herman Miller communications team in the spring of 1998, Aeron had become an object of desire for many upwardly mobile office workers, as well as a reliable cash cow for Herman Miller's employees and shareholders. The chair, which was deemed the Design of the Decade by the Industrial Designers Society of America, became a statement of status and a symbol of innovation.

There were several significant product introductions during my ten-year run at Herman Miller -- among them the Resolve system and My Studio Environments, as well as the Mirra task chair (on which I'm happily perched in my home office at the moment). But nary a week went by during that decade without at least a few media interactions focused on the aston-



Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick







ishing, enduring Aeron.

At times, it was to promote improvements or extensions to the Aeron line -- the PostureFit support for the lower back, the upgrades to the Pellicle mesh, the introduction of new colors or materials for the mesh or the frame, the ability to sew in custom designs or logos on the chair, and so forth. Other times, it was to defend the chair against copycat designs that mushroomed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. There also was the public relations tarnish that Aeron endured during the dot-com implosion as an example of corporate excess. That was conveyed most poignantly and memorably in a widely published photo of a downsized Enron Corporation employee wheeling a box of his personal belongings to the parking lot astride his Aeron chair.

My colleague in Herman Miller's corporate communications efforts at the time, Mark Schurman, cheerfully recalled those hectic but happy years of promoting a product that captured the imagination and fascination of an industry.

"It all happened so quickly," he recalled. "Some of it was thoughtful planning and care-

ful orchestration. But some of it was pure magic and good fortune. Aeron really was the first commercial or contract design to completely cross over into the popular culture."

Aeron started showing up on movie sets and in television shows, and as a prop in national advertisements for -- yes, really -- other products.

Both of us have since moved on from our Herman Miller postings, although Aeron represents the salad days for us and possibly for our former employer. What other chair has found its way into Seth Godin's "Purple Cow" or Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink"? What other chair served as the celestial throne for God Almighty in Matt Groening's "The Simpsons"? What other chair created the OHL (Office Hockey League)?

Task chairs come and go.

Aeron soared.

For a very, very long time.

Its dominance and cache' may have faded over the decades, but it's still aloft.

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From Geriatric Inspiration to Design Classic: The History of the Aeron

Simply put, the Herman Miller Aeron chair is the most important piece of office furniture ever built. Herman Miller balked at what the designers first came up with, the Sarah chair, because, well, they didn't know how to sell a high-end ergonomic chair for old people. So Stumpf and Chadwick went back to the drawing board.

Words by Rob Kirkbride

**Functionally, it ought to move
and adjust as simply and
naturally as possible. It should
support a person in any
position he cares to assume,
at any task his office job
serves up.**





From Geriatric Inspiration to Design Classic: The History of the Aeron

The design, which has become so much a part of the office, was shocking when it was unveiled at Orgatec in 1994.

Words by Rob Kirkbride

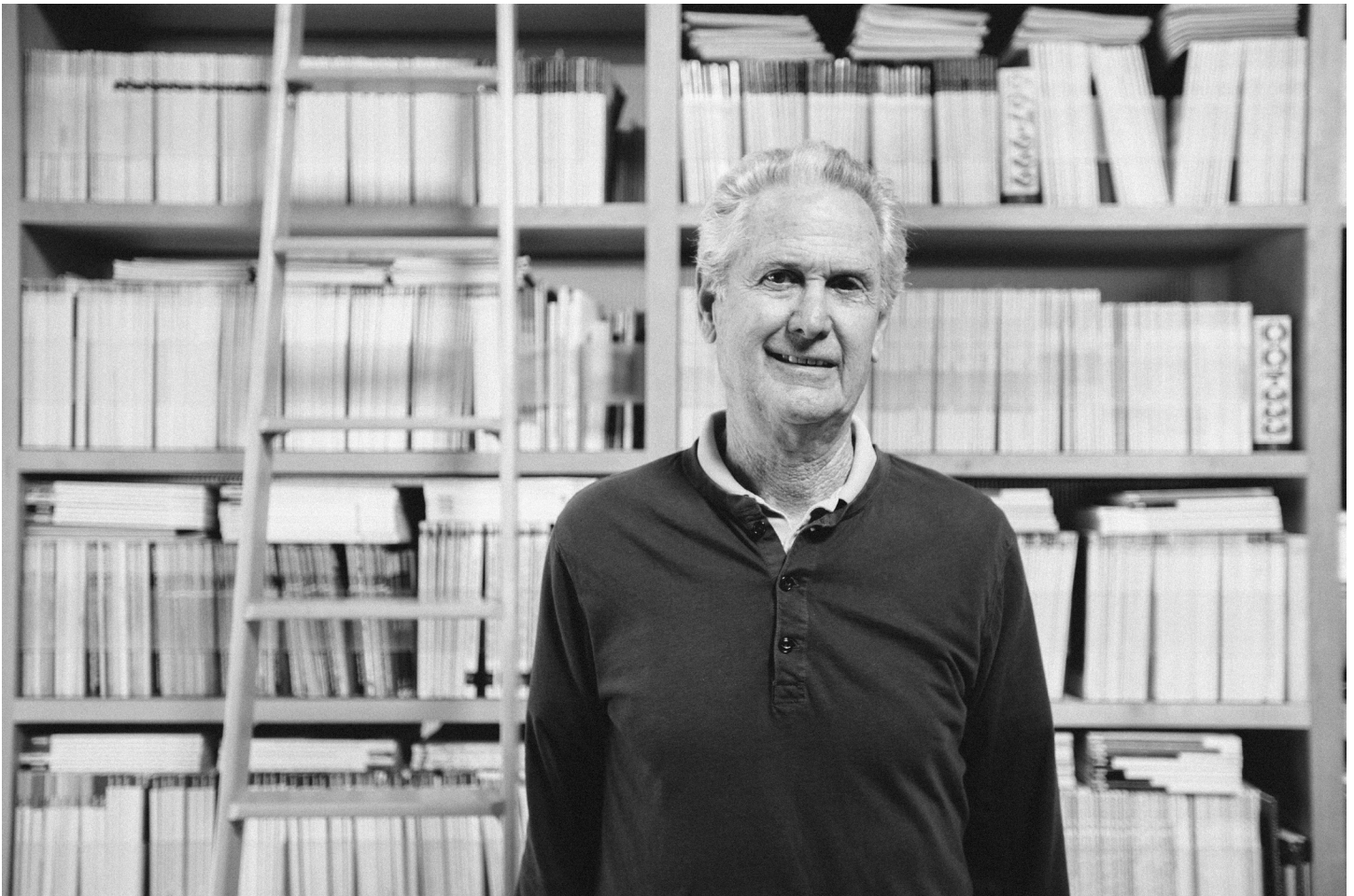
Simply put, the Herman Miller Aeron chair is the most important piece of office furniture ever built. It is the one of the most successful and important products this industry has created, especially when one considers the number of mesh chairs “inspired” by the original. It is the first, and arguably, the only, piece of office furniture that workers coveted by name.

Not bad for a chair that was originally designed for the elderly. Bill Stumpf, who designed Aeron with Don Chadwick, was the son of a gerontological nurse. Stumpf and Chadwick were tapped to look at how the aging of America might lead to a new area of business for Herman Miller creating fur-

niture for the elderly. The idea for creating a mesh chair came from the observation that old people were sitting too long in their recliners and needed ergonomics to stay healthy and mesh to prevent bedsores.

Herman Miller balked at what the designers first came up with, the Sarah chair, because, well, they didn’t know how to sell a high-end ergonomic chair for old people. So Stumpf and Chadwick went back to the drawing board. They shed the foam completely and created increasingly futuristic chairs.

Imagine the world before the Aeron. Chairs were covered in foam and fabric. Herman Miller had designed ergonomic chairs before Aeron — Ergon



Don Chadwick

came out in 1976, Equa in 1984 and Ergon 2 in 1988, but Aeron was something totally different. It was made of a stretched, semi-transparent, flexible mesh called Pellicle, which hadn't even been invented when the chair was first designed. Pellicle came after the Aeron design was created. The chair was designed in three sizes, something the industry had never seen before.

And it looked like nothing else on the market. The design, which has become so much a part of the office, was shocking when it was unveiled at Orgatec in 1994. Consider the risk Herman Miller's Chief Executive Officer Dick Ruch was taking by green lighting the radically different chair. When Ruch was named CEO in 1987, he was the first person outside of the De Pree family to hold that title. If the Aeron failed, he was finished.

Yet it was this differentiation that was a huge part of the Aeron design strategy and one of the most critical aspects of the chair's success. "It was a mat-

ter of deliberate design to create a 'new signature shape' for the Aeron chair," said Stumpf, reflecting on his creation. "Competitive ergonomic chairs became look-alikes."

"The human form has no straight lines; it is biomorphic," he said. "We designed the chair to be, above all, biomorphic, or curvilinear, as a metaphor of human form in the visual as well as the tactile sense. There is not one straight line to be found on an Aeron chair."

Herman Miller did not send Aeron to the masses without first testing it. The company brought in physical therapists, ergonomists and orthopedic specialists to make sure the science behind the chair was right. It also showed the chair to workers and sampled more than 200 people to make sure the sizes "fit" well.

The chair took off almost immediately and a few years into production, the company knew it had a hit. It became a cultural obsession with Will, one



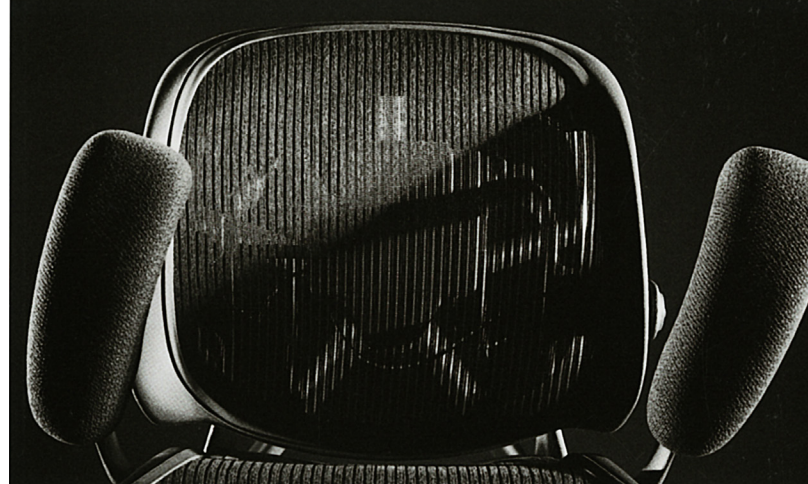




Bill Stumpf

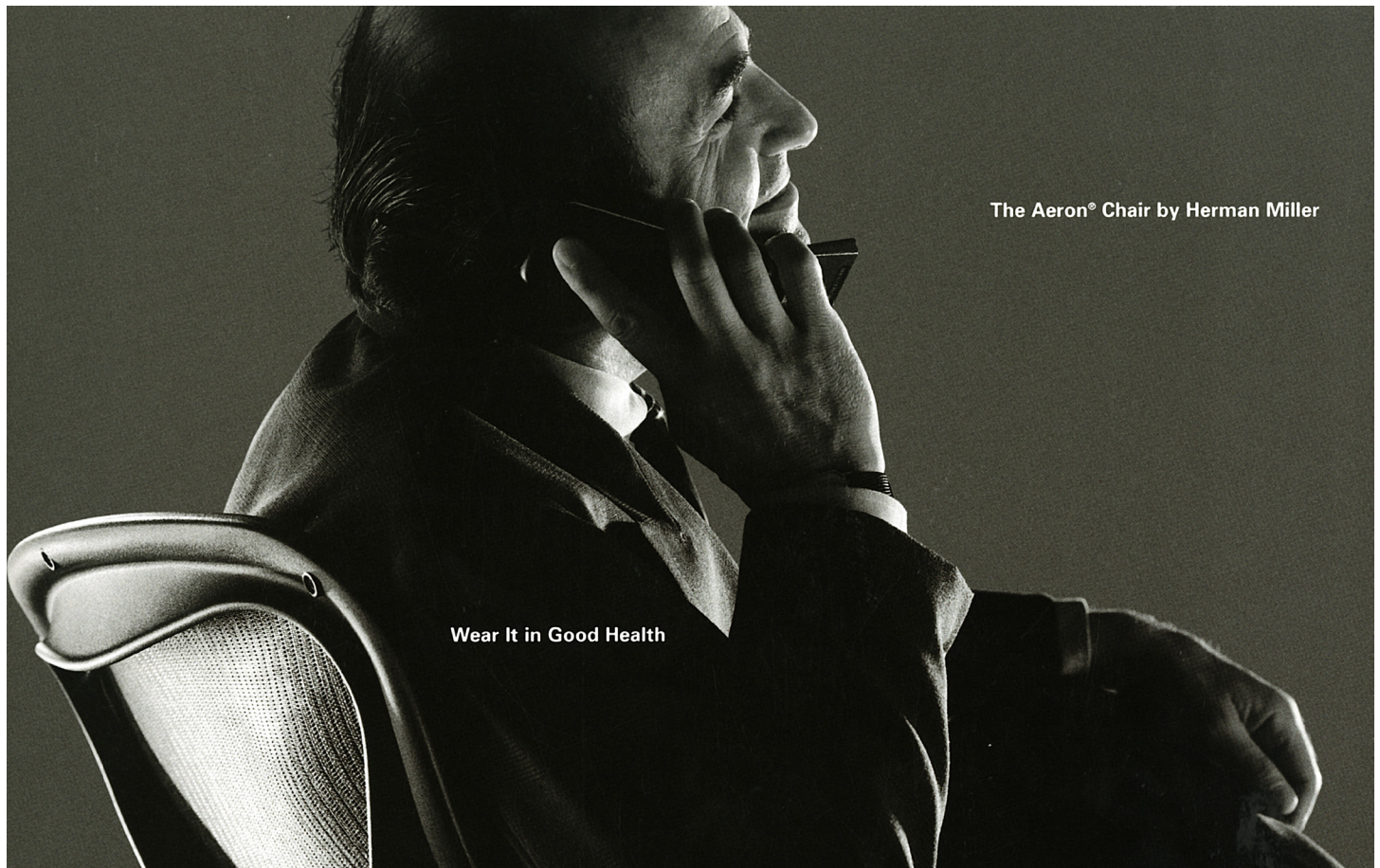
of the main characters on the sitcom “Will and Grace,” spending an entire episode trying to get one of the chairs. In an episode of “The Simpsons,” God was seen sitting on an Aeron in heaven. It was featured on countless shows. New York magazine called Aeron “the Dot-Com Throne.” The dot-com love affair with the Aeron was a mixed blessing. The chair was everywhere in Silicon Valley and became a symbol of the excesses of the dot-com industry and its bursting bubble. A famous photo from the era shows an ex-Enron employee using an Aeron to move her boxes of personal items out of the shuttered building.

Not everyone fell under Aeron’s spell. Sitting expert A. C. Mandal has criticized the Aeron as “far too low” and not offering enough height adjustment for the sitter to move. Aeron’s timing aligned with the move toward a more sedentary work environment where workers began spending hours in front of a computer screen. But according to Chadwick, the idea behind Aeron was not to create



a chair that could be used for hours at a time. “We were given a brief and basically told to design the next-generation office chair,” Chadwick said.

In 2006, a Time magazine staffer wrote the story, “I hate my Aeron chair,” outlining her distain for the design classic. “In fact, I hate it so much that I don’t have it anymore. I wheeled it into a conference room a while back and abandoned it. In its



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place is a brand-free, standard upholstery seat orphaned from before our office redesign. My new-old chair has pokey wheels and mysterious stains and the faint whiff of other people's butts. I don't care. So long as it's not an Aeron."

Still, the Aeron haters are in the minority. The Internet is full of love letters to the Aeron, like this one from an online community of medical transcriptionists: "I've had mine for a little over a year and I really love it. It's SO comfortable and really helped my back pain. I think I paid a little over \$900 for mine but it was worth every penny. I'm quite overweight and I really liked the fact that I could order it in the wider size and it fits my butt a lot better than most other chairs."

The new Aeron does not mark the first time the chair has been tweaked, but it certainly is the most

dramatic change. PostureFit was a modest, but fundamental addition to the original Aeron design that was added to support the base of the user's spine, or sacral region, to help the user's pelvis maintain a natural forward tilt, preventing slouching and keeping the spine in alignment.

Stumpf would not live to see the latest iteration of his creation. The designer died in 2006. "I enjoy myself, and I do it through design," he declared in an interview a few years before his death. "I love beauty, and I love the availability of beautiful things and useful things immediately around me."

The ultimate proof is in the Aeron's financial success. Over 7 million Aerons have been sold to date, and another one is spit out of Herman Miller's factory every 17 seconds.

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User Analysis
↳ which type is segmented?

Lead Marketing Campaign
Conversion Analysis



related fields of data



enterprise user



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Send To: news@bellow.press

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